

Making Sense of Postmodern Conditions for Christian Living

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One of the longstanding epistemological questions of the philosophers is: what is truth and how do we know it? Postmodernists are suspicious of the traditional philosophical answers that base reliable knowledge of the world on foundationalist principles or self-evident concepts. Post-truth society is anti-foundationalist at the core. Truth in postmodern times is more of a dominant political and social construction for practical purposes than a concrete objective lying hidden to be discovered by a scientific methodology. The Nietzschean aphorism, “there are no facts, only interpretations,” captures the mood of a postmodern/post-truth society (Nietzsche, 1967: 481). The first part of this essay is aimed at providing the theoretical position of a postmodern/post-truth society in contrast to modernism. The second half of the essay reflects on the conditions the postmodern/post-truth society imposes on Christian theology and the life of the Church.

INCOMMENSURABILITY OF LIFE-WORLDS

A search for universal essence had long been the project of modernity. By contrast, post-truth society celebrates multiple voices and the incommensurability of various life-worlds. Any strategy for defining universal conditions that underlie all cultures is branded as an attempt to establish a metanarrative. In his *Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard analyzes these “grand metanarratives” of modernity. He describes postmodernism as *incredulity towards metanarrative* (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv) “where metanarratives are understood as totalizing stories about history and the goals of the human race that ground and legitimize knowledge and cultural practices” (Woodward, 1998).

People in our times are skeptical about metanarratives. Metanarratives are broad overarching theories or beliefs about the operation of science, society and religion. A metanarrative often includes claims about what reality is, how legitimization of knowledge happens, how one should live, how experts make themselves believable and trustworthy, and so forth. A narrative of this sort is referred to as metanarrative because of its universal, exclusivist, totalizing and absolute nature. Lyotard illustrates in his *Report on Knowledge* two modern metanarratives: (1) Marxian interpretation of history and social relations based on a materialist economy and (2) the promise of the progress of all humanity through the absolute trust and dependence on capitalist technoscience (Enlightenment commitment to science and progress). Metanarratives often include grand theories, classical texts, scriptures, etc., that legitimize knowledge and provide a framework through which an individual’s experience and thought may be ordered.

Post-truth society is a cultural condition in which people abandon trust in metanarratives and their legitimizing functions. Sweeping interpretations and hegemonic structures are no longer desirable for the postmodern generation and are considered highly questionable. If metanarratives have lost their power to convince, postmodernists propose that metanarratives give way in favor of little narratives. Little narratives could be metaphorically explained as a collection of games, each with a set of rules governing what is allowed within that particular game. Lyotard and many other postmodern thinkers have viewed this as a positive development for several reasons. Grand theories tend to dismiss the naturally existing chaos and disorder of society. Metanarratives ignore heterogeneity and various ways of being in the world. The concept of *little narratives* aligns with postmodern expressions in other fields like *Lived-praxis* (Liberation theology) Language-games (Wittgensteinians) *Life-world* (Phenomenology).

If life-worlds are incommensurable and do not have any universal foundations or a common defining essence, will it not lead to indeterminacy in truth claims? Does it not mean that truth can mean anything, depending upon the individual or groups that believe in them? Postmodernists are accused of an extreme form of relativism and indeterminacy in society. In a postmodern/post-truth society, there is a lot of ambivalence in terms of decision-making, not so much indeterminacy. A truth claim is always determined by a particular power and knowledge matrix that produces it (Foucault, 1995). Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, traces the genealogy of human sciences to various power configurations of modern society. Inability to decide arises because of the competition between two different contexts or complex power structures engaged in truth claims. There is nothing bad about ambivalence as long as there is the freedom to choose. In fact, that forms one of the constitutive features of any democratic society. Public reasoning and debates are possible because political communities are not pre-wired.

The basic epistemic questions concerning truth cannot be resolved easily because truth is always made rather than discovered. Different life-worlds construct different truths. Searching for pure objective knowledge unmediated by culture, theories, and perspectives is absurd. Nietzsche elaborates it well in *The Genealogy of Morals*, "There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective knowing; and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity' be" (Nietzsche, 1989, III:12). Knowledge is always acquired from the viewpoint of particular interests, value orientations, survival needs, etc., which Nietzsche calls *affects*. *Affects* are our access to truth, not hindrances. An *affect* gives a perspective. When a person or a society is locked in one perspective and is unable to appreciate multiple perspectives, it is a red flag. The more *affect* one accommodates, the more objective our knowledge will be. However, knowledge does not require a *complete* tag because it is an epistemic ideal for a post-truth society. There are always other affective sets that

would focus on different aspects of reality, making knowledge progressive and never absolute. Scholarship immerses itself deeply and thoroughly in some particular *affects* (perspective). The task of a philosopher in a post-truth society is shifting perspectives. Objectivity should not be understood as a disinterested contemplation of *things-in-themselves*, but rather being able to move freely between different perspectives without being stuck in a particular viewpoint. Postmodernists are not longing for Plato's unchanging invisible world of *ideas*, but their hero is Heraclitus, who proclaimed *Panta rei*.

Few postmodernists reject the notion of truth entirely, though they all reject the idea of absolute eternal truth. Yet even in rejecting the absolute truth, they do not reject everything. It is the larger questions of human life, such as moral, social, and political claims about how one should live, that postmodernists refuse to think of as absolute. Thus a postmodern/post-truth society can be identified through their (1) refusal of essentialism, (2) anti-foundational stand (3) multi-perspectivism in approach towards truth, and (4) exposition of multiple bases for the production of knowledge.

The spirit of this thinking could be better expressed by saying *we live in a post-truth society*. The popular definitions of post-truth are found in Oxford and Macmillan Dictionaries. Oxford defines post-truth as "an adjective defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'" (Flood, 2016). Another definition is as follows: "...relating to a situation or system in which the truth is neglected or ignored in favor of emotions and beliefs" (Macmillan). This paper slightly differs from such views and defines it as a cultural condition in which people are acutely aware of the limitations of their truth claims.

POSTMODERN NIHILISM: PROMISES OF SCIENTIFIC RATIONALITY

The postmodern/post-truth society is nihilistic about the enlightenment project of progress and the promises of scientific rationality. The enlightenment project ranges from the "promise of political independence and human liberation through representative democracy and/or the victory of the masses to the claims for the efficacy of scientific knowledge as the harbinger of social progress through victory over a now mostly tamed nature and through social engineering" (Amariglio, Cullenberg, & Ruccio, 2001: 9). Thinkers in late modernity raised questions about how a remarkable scientific advancement could go hand in hand with destructive rationality. How could such incredible progress in society justify unforgivable retrogression in politics? Genocide, persecution, mass slaughter, nuclear bombs, chemical weapons, and hatred of others have all occurred far too often, casting doubt on the legitimacy of the modern metanarrative of progress (Dew Jr. & Kelly, 2017: 189).

In addressing these questions postmodern thinkers found that science which was considered the only valid model of the human search for knowledge and truth is not necessarily rational (Detmer, 2013: 158). Modernity equated reason with science

and insisted that rationalism must be understood in terms of scientific naturalism. The methods of natural science ignore anything that is non-quantifiable. Natural science, in fact, is a constitution of an exact universe that consists of entities which are merely defined and definable in mathematical terms. The misplaced trust in scientific objectivity and the universal application of scientific formulas to all aspects of life finally makes science itself ignore its meaning and value, because these are taken to be very subjective and non-measurable. A rationality that rejects the questions concerning meaning and value is itself self-contradictory (pp.160-161).

Postmodernists are not against the spectacular achievement of science but question the skewed interpretation of the nature, scope, and limits of science. When science became too narrow and specialized, it lost connection to its *raison d'être*. The science here could mean all human sciences, including theology modeled after the natural scientific paradigm. Theology is nothing but a systematic and rational reflection on the faith experience of a community. Theology in the process of its development, expansion, and sophistication as a science seems to have forgotten its *raison d'être*.

The problem with such a scientific activity, as Husserl points out, is that it is mechanical. The scientist depends on the formalization and development of mathematics and algorithmic procedures. This demands following some well-formed rules. The methods of science undergo a kind of 'technization' and its application becomes a matter of routine. Science becomes the successful application of some methodical procedures. Science and knowledge of nature can be seen as merely a matter of technique (Gurwitsch, 1965: 297-98). Spectacular achievements have been made possible by the use of this method. In the process of such technique-based inquiry, presuppositions are taken for granted. Knowledge attained in this manner has led scientists to disregard human biases in this process. It is the human who conducts science. Yet science fails to acknowledge the role of the human subject in influencing scientific results (Husserl, 1970).

Postmodern thinkers respond to this quandary by calling for a renewed focus on the life-world, for they say the technical world is only a derivative. It is a mistake that science subordinates the life-world to theoretical constructs. Postmodern critique calls attention to the subjective-relative world of lived experience, which is far richer than the formal objective world of the positive sciences.

POSTMODERN CONDITIONS FOR THEOLOGY

Does postmodern/post-truth society pose any conditions of impossibility for talking about religious truth? What does it mean to do theology in a post-truth society? This section of the essay draws out some implications for theology by taking some cues from the postmodern conditions of society, especially its critique of the methodology. It is a fact that we cannot legitimately hold theology and modern science on a single platform. The methodology of natural sciences and their object of inquiry differs from theology. However, it is possible to find certain parallelisms in the inner mechanism

with which both the modern science (in the Husserlian sense) and theology of the Catholic Church as science grew and functioned in society.

To begin with, theology as a science is a human endeavor. It is a systematic and rational reflection on the faith experience of a community. Theology can trace its origin back to specific, pragmatic faith responses to the problems that the community of believers faced during particular periods in history. At the initial stage, theology was at the service of the community. The community provided the material—problems, solutions, actions, and thinking- to be taken up and worked on by the theologians. In this sense, we can say that the tradition and the scriptures were the source and validating grounds of all theology.

Theology, in its development, expansion, and sophistication as a science has forgotten its *raison d'être*. The community's life praxis (life-world) is the foundation upon which the theology must rest. The religious experience of the people constitutes the first source, the ground for theology. How people live their faith and hope and practice their love is the most crucial discourse about God. Forgetting this basic fact, the theologians disregard the role of the faith community in theological activity. By paying disproportionate attention to the dogmatic conformity in theology, the theological activity runs the risk of authoritarianism and technization. Similarly, an exclusive and inordinate focus on certain dominant rites within the Church has led to the emergence of an exclusivist theology. Excessive concern for uniformity overemphasizes universality within the Roman Catholic Church, making dialogue difficult both within the Church and outside. A tendency towards dogmatism and suspicion of other viewpoints is simply a fact that cannot be overlooked.

In the dogmatic method, the magisterium became the guarantor of the entire theological enterprise by providing it with its theses, guaranteeing its ultimate validity, and serving as a defense against contrary viewpoints. Under such circumstances, the critical and prophetic functions of theology were overlooked and a triumphalist cult of certitude and theological absolutism loomed all over. Gradually, theology became a speculative enterprise alienated from its original purpose and source. Religious truths became a matter of logical conformity of philosophical categories rather than genuine experience within an existential situation. Any spiritual reality or experience that does not conform to the theological categories was considered marginal or deviant and hence suppressed. The result of this dogmatic theological tradition flowed into people's faith, and they validated their religious experience despite its oppressive delivery.

The problem is not theology itself but the way it is interpreted. The concern is with the very presuppositions of the theology itself, which are dogmatic and highly technical. These presuppositions are often taken for granted and inherited unreflectively from the past. The task of postmodern theologians is to explain and clarify those presuppositions on which the theology bases its validity. It involves an investigation into the historical roots of the origin of theological concepts. How do past interests and events shape the present theology? What are the meanings and practices that communities inherited

uncritically from the past? What are the operative traditions found sedimented in contemporary theology?

Such an exercise will open up a new world of religious experience hidden from us because of the intense preoccupation with dogmatic theology. An understanding of God not filtered through the theological categories. Theology becomes a second-order enterprise to the concrete life and the practice of faith. Theology then deals with concrete problems and considers concrete praxis, not abstract issues. We call this praxis-oriented theology or theology of practices, which considers dialogue with human sciences and natural sciences as an essential element of theologizing. It makes theology a multi-directional enterprise and liberates it from any self-imposed isolation. Another welcome feature of this theology is its community-centeredness, which accords well with the contemporary signs of times. They have shifted the focus of the theological endeavor from mere speculation to the community of faith.

THEOLOGY OF PRACTICES: OUR METHODOLOGY IS OUR SPIRITUALITY

Postmodern thinking has led to the rise of a group of new theological movements under the terms Liberation theology, Subaltern theology, Black theology, and Feminist theology, which have swept across the globe. The scope of this essay is not to go into the details of these theological movements that sprang up in postmodern times but rather to acknowledge their methodologies as new frameworks for conducting theology. It would be an oversimplification to reduce all these theologies just to one kind because there are no precise essential features to which all these theologies subscribe. However, they all agree on new ways of conducting theology that begin with concrete experience and practice.

These new theological movements believe that Christian faith manifests through love, action, and commitment to the service of humankind. Theology is a reflection of such activity rather than its motivation. This is a Copernican turn in theology. As Gutiérrez points out, the newness is not so much in the theme for reflection but in the way they do it (Gutierrez, 1973: 11). The traditional approach to theology, they thought, uses its canonical texts to understand the world around them, their role in it, and the rules (Waitkus, 2019: 131-140). It was largely a foundationalist paradigm: “the basis for theology had to be nailed down (to the scriptures and tradition) before theology per se could be engaged” (Stiver, 2003: 172). While new theological movements stressed the lived praxis as their locus, theology as a reflection might come only after engaging in action.

This commitment to lived praxis leads a Christian to understand the scriptures and tradition in a new light. Knowing the truth of the Gospel here is not merely an intellectual exercise but praxis-oriented (Dupertuis, 1991: 128). Truth is not just pre-given or an agreement or correspondence, but it is discovered in a dynamic hermeneutic process. It is more about *doing the truth* than *knowing the truth*. As Boff puts it, theology works on the data given in faith in a hermeneutic mediation, with the help of social sciences

(Boff, 1987). This process helps expose the ideologically distorted structures of this world and how the center, the privileged, capitalizes on and guarantees all meaning. Gutiérrez, in *Theology of Liberation* (1973), claims that the original task of theology is not to decipher the *encrypted* divine truths; instead, 'only by doing this truth will our faith be "verified." Doing truth for liberation theology meant joining the oppressed in their historic struggle for freedom (Barger, 2018). The issues concerning liberation theology are now being extended to questions concerning race, gender, and, more recently, the environment. These theologies of practices are skeptical about the absolute versions of truth and metanarratives used to legitimize the truth claims unmediated by culture and historical situations. Against a universal language about God, these theological movements promoted an 'interested language.' Gutierrez writes one should not forget the wider horizons of understanding our languages about God: "the language of the marginalized and oppressed, the language of their liberation and the language of the gospel of Jesus" (Gutierrez, 2007: 31-32). For example, the African-American slaves appropriated the Christian faith in the context of their experience of slavery in the past and racism in the present (Antonio, 2007). Similarly, enlightened activists and intellectuals engaged in the struggle for justice for women through the reconstruction of theology and deconstructive reading of the Scriptures. Eco-theological movements try to understand God as being interested in a web of relationships where people, animals, and the earth are equally sacred. They recognize the eco-crises as the context of many other global crises. In their theological reflection, they reread the abusive interpretation of the phrase, "fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over everything" (Genesis 1:28).

Theologies of practice claimed to avoid the spectator-like approach to knowledge. They rejected the extensively detached and neutral standpoint of Christian Orthodoxy and replaced it with an "interpretive involvement in the world." The world we live in is always interpreted and participated by us as we engage in various activities. We discover new possibilities in our existential encounters with other beings. However, it is always possible that the original existential discoveries and disclosures of God, the world, and ourselves can get covered up in the tradition and become absorbed into the consensus (Heidegger, 1996: 164-166). As a result, things don't always need to show themselves as they are. If so, theology cannot be a passive reflection or a reflector of what is revealed. Doing theology involves an intense search for meaning assisted by social sciences without confusing the social scientific and theological tasks. Though such appropriations have happened several times in the church's history, as postmodern theologians cite, many conservatives call it illegitimate. For example, Thomas Aquinas used Aristotelian Philosophy to build and reform his theological system. To prove that faith does not contradict nature or reason, he used the Aristotelian system, whose fundamental thesis contradicted the essentials of Christian teaching (Camara, 1978: 174-182).

Does the influence of social sciences in theology challenge the normative role of Scripture and tradition? How shall we understand the relevance of *Sola Scriptura* in a postmodern/post-truth society? For Reformers, *Sola Scriptura* is the supreme authority of Scripture for the faith and life of the church (Vanhoozer, 2003: 167). The Bible is not just a set of information revealed in propositional form, but narratives with promises and summons that become the supreme norm for Christian faith and life (p.167). Do these narratives command “epistemic and existential primacy in the life of the church?” Vanhoozer interprets *Sola Scriptura* as a guard against the “hardening of human tradition into totalizing metanarrative.” The implicit understanding is that the scripture accommodates multiple voices: the testimony of the prophets and apostles in the biblical narratives is a concrete witness to it. The deconstructive practices in the bible challenge and inspire believers to voice themselves against politically and morally oppressive practices in society. Jesus himself was a deconstructive practitioner. The *tradition* is equally essential to encounter the voice of God in the Bible. The Bible, as the Scripture, speaks to the believers only through particular interpretive traditions. It is the tradition, the ecclesial community that gives life to the Word of God.

Tradition, however, becomes dogmatic when it poses itself as complete and insulated from the world. It considers certain forms of worship universally binding to all people, regardless of their cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. On many occasions in the past, perhaps even today, Christianity and the Roman Catholic Church, in particular, have flirted with grand, overarching schemes that classify people and “human experience in some monolithic way” (Cook, 2001: 17). The logic of the Christian metanarrative always operates by producing binary opposites like Christians/non-Christians, sacred/secular, male/female, Christian truth/pagan falsehood, whites/people of color, presence/absence, Christian rationality/ savage natives, civility/barbarity, speech/writing. A member of the pair is privileged and becomes the center, while *the other* is ignored and marginalized. A deconstructive reading of the history tells us that such troubling dualisms have been written into the culture, religion, and socioeconomic theories, and knowledge production is legitimized through it (Addicott, 2012).

Derrida ironically calls such attitudes of privileging the center over the other *Phallogocentrism* (Derrida, 1992). However, Derrida’s interest is not just to expose the struggle between a masculine presence and a feminine presence or the subordination of the feminine to the masculine (the *phallus*) in our language and social relations. Whenever a person, group, culture, or school of thought assumes that something is natural, normal, or self-evident, that can be a *phallogocentric* attitude. If that is the case, a postmodern church must first ask, what *phallogocentric* attitudes she is obsessed with? What are *phallogocentric* attitudes in a missionary church/parish? How shall we make so long *invisible* in our society and the Church visible? How shall the marginal voices be heard? Theology in postmodern times should not content itself as a methodology; for disciples of Jesus, it is a way of being in this world. As Gutierrez said, “our methodology is our spirituality.” (Gutierrez, 2007: 30)

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ENDNOTES

1. *Consensus* is a situation when one refuses to face his being and assume the responsibility and hides in the false security and peace provided by the 'they'
2. Derrida discusses in his later works how phallogocentric attitude influences the development of the Western culture expressed through philosophical writings, various art forms, and government. *Différance* (1968), *Plato's Pharmacy* (1972), *Spurs* (1978), and *The Post Card* (1980)